HARD CHOICES

September 22, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
James 3:13-18
Mark 8:27-37

"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life."
-Mark 3:36 (NRSV)

What do you want to be when you grow up? The question never leaves us. Or, perhaps more accurately, we find ourselves answering it - all our lives.

It comes at us early, and sometimes we learn how to answer and how not to answer because of the reactions of those who ask it of us. And sometimes what we want to be is powerfully shaped by the ones who ask the question and who respond to our childish answers either with approval or disapproval.

I recall, for some reason, a discussion in a Sunday School class. I must have been ten years old. The teacher asked us what we want to be when we grow up and I answered: "I want to be a baseball player." To this day I recall the teacher painstakingly explaining how unrealistic and unlikely that was... how very few ever make it to the top... how irresponsible it was to pin your hopes on it, something so remote, etc., etc. I'm not sure it's the only reason I never played for the Pirates - but it was a learning experience.

In a time when second and third careers are not uncommon, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" is a relevant question.

And ever for those of us who probably will not choose alternate careers, the question points to a deeper dilemma - namely that life is, in a sense, always asking/demanding that we choose who we will be.

It is a question of profound importance. It may be <u>the</u> question. It is a question being asked in a particular way by feminist writers. "What does it mean to be a woman?" And the

popular writers of the new men's movement are also asking what it means to be a man today.

In the current bestseller, Fire in the Belly, "On Being A Man," by Sam Keen, there is a provocative section about work and identity. Keen is a philosopher, author, editor of Psychology Today, and before all that, a professor of Theology at a Presbyterian Seminary, although you will not find that mentioned on the dust jacket of the book. He maintains that old definitions of what it means to be a man don't work anymore, and that in the wake of a decade or so of feminism, men have some catching up to do. His book is about men but it is certainly not exclusively for men. Keen and other writers about contemporary men and manhood, maintains that ever since the industrial revolution took adult men away from home to earn a living, boys who have spent most of their time with women, have been deprived of consistent adult male role models, and traditional rites of passage into adulthood. The culture has stepped in and done inadequately what fathers, uncles, grandfathers, village elders used to do. Listen to him on this matter of identity.

> "Preparations for the male ritual of work begins even before the age of schooling. Long before a little boy child has a concept of the day after tomorrow, he will be asked by well- meaning but unconscious adults, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' It will not take him long to discover that 'I want to be a horse' is not an answer that satisfies adults. They want to know what men plan to do, what job, profession, occupation, we have decided to follow at five years of age! Boys are taught early that they are what they do.
>
> "Our rites of passage, include the games which prepare men for the battles of business and life... the first full-time job...and then getting a credit card. "The credit card," Keen says, "is for the modern male what killing prey was to a hunter... The Visa Card is an insignia of membership, a sign that the system trusts you to spend what you have not yet earned. In modern America going into debt is an important part of assuming the responsibilities of manhood. Debt, the willingness to live beyond our means, binds us to the economic system that requires both surplus work and surplus consumption. The popular bumper sticker 'I owe, I owe, so off to work I go,' might well be the litany to express the dilemma of modern men and women." [p. 51-53]

Keen, poet Robert Bly and Chicago psychologist Robert Moore, like the feminist writers before them, are holding up for

our careful inspection today, the models of manhood and womanhood which powerfully influence us. Their work is important. They are asking about our basic identity as men and women who live and move and have being for seven or eight decades in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They are asking the human question - "Who are we? Why are we who we are? Who will we be when we grow up?"

Sam Keen and those others are joining a growing chorus of voices suggesting that our models are wrong and that if our identity is defined in economic terms alone, profits, consumerism, acquisitions, security, we are working with a very low and inadequate model of our humanity. The word "economist" itself has evolved. Originally it meant manager. An economist was one who managed a household with simplicity and efficiency and without waste. People who paid serious attention to domestic management used to be called home economists. Significantly the University of Iowa recently changed the name of its Home Economics Department to Consumer Science. [Keen, p. 225] Keen thinks we do answer the identity question in economic terms... Jesus asked simply "What does it profit to gain the world and lose your soul?"

"Have we been so successful at inculcating a culture of economic individualism that we are losing our capacity for ethical citizenship?" asks a former vice-president of General Motors. [Can We Keep Our Glorious Market In Its Proper Place?, Elmer Johnson]

Matthew Fox, professor at Mundelein, says we have become compulsive consumers, walking garbage cans espousing the philosophy, "I buy, therefore, I am." [A Spirituality Called Compassion, p. 193]

And the former head of NBC and Curtis Publishing predicts that "if our system fails it will be because the principle compulsion of most people running American business today is to make short-run profits... The disease is greed." [Ibid, p. 196]

I chuckled at Sam Keen's throw-away line that the world today is divided between nations who suffer because their economies have collapsed and nations who suffer because their economies have succeeded. And I stopped chuckling when I realized that the newspaper on Thursday morning documented the truth of that observation. Page two told about unemployment and the utter lack of consumer goods because of the failed economic system in Eastern Europe. Page three told that the United States leads the free world in every measurable category of poverty... education, per cent of population hungry, health care, life expectancy. Page four told how hopeless it is to be young and ambitious in Yugoslavia. Page five told how the teen pregnancy rate in Illinois increased more this year than in any year in the

past two decades. Page six told about children abandoned and starving in the Horn of Africa. Page seven told about the children who died in the most recent "drive-by" shooting in Chicago.

So maybe it is time for the culture, the nation, to ask about the basic definition of men and women which are operative here, about what we choose to be as a people. And maybe it is time for each of us to ask - who we are and why we are what we are and who we choose to be when we grow up, i.e. in the years of life we have left.

It was that kind of critical juncture for the friends of Jesus one day when he asked them what people were saying about him. They told him that some were saying he was John the Baptist, others thought he was Elijah. Both John and Elijah are the ones who will announce and prepare the way for coming of the Messiah in Israel. "But who do you say that I am?" he asked. And Peter said simply, "You are the Messiah." But when Jesus goes on to the persecution and suffering and death that will follow, Peter argues with him. What is happening internally in this familiar incident is that the question about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, the academic question, has become the existential question, the question of personal identity. Who he is really means "Who do you choose to be?" As soon as Jesus starts discussing the implications and the results of calling him Messiah, Peter begins to back away. It's time for a hard choice. The incident happens at the end of an extended period of traveling through Galilee, teaching, healing, staying with friends, and at the beginning of the period focused on Jerusalem, a time of confrontation and conflict, of arrest and trial and execution.

It's time to decide who they will be. And so he puts it to them directly:

> "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

A cross to bear is sometimes the way we describe a physical handicap, a recurring relational problem, a heavy family responsibility, but that is not what Jesus meant. To "take up a cross" is to volunteer, to assume responsibility you don't have to assume, to welcome tasks you have every right to avoid. "To take up a cross" is to do the unnecessary, to accept for oneself obligations the avoidance of which would cause no one to think any less of us. "To take up a cross" is to invoke the "S" word: sacrifice. "We scoff at saints who deny self and assume volun-

tary hardships" observes Elain Prevallet. [Weavings, May/June, 1991] We call it regressive and sick, masochistic... bad psychology.

To take up a cross and follow Jesus is to make a big decision about who I am and who I will be. It is to make a very basic philosophic affirmation about the meaning of my life. It is to say that my own being will henceforth be established, not as I find myself, look into my soul, become my own best friend, take care of myself, indulge myself, but as I give myself away. It is not a decision our culture has applauded recently.

The poet Robert Bly has written a book about being a man that is also a bestseller. It too, is not exclusively for males and addresses our common humanity with wisdom and wit. Bly uses male archetypes, and the work of Chicago psychologist Robert Moore as the basis of his discussion. I found myself thinking about what Jesus said to his friends about losing and saving their lives when I read Bly on the "Warrior."

The poet hopes that modern men will recover the "internal warrior" which is in all of us... not the violent warrior... but that place in all men and women, capable of anger at injustice, that fierce fighter inside which is ready to stand up for one's own. Bly suggests that what we need are angry men who will not tolerate drug dealers preying on their little ones.

Bly says a true warrior is in service to a purpose greater than himself: a transcendent cause - which he calls a "True King."

Listen to the poet and please substitute female pronouns as appropriate:

> "When a warrior is in service to a True King... he does well and his body becomes a hardworking servant which he requires to undergo cold, heat, pain, wounds, scarring, hunger, lack of sleep. The person in touch with warrior energy can work long hours, ignore fatigue, do what is necessary to finish the Ph.D. and all the footnotes, endure obnoxious department heads, live sparsely like Ralph Nader, write as T. S. Eliot did under a single, dangling light bulb, clean up filth as St. Francis or Mother Teresa, endure contempt, disdain and exile as Sakharov did." Iron John, p. 150-151]

Jesus said: "Take up your cross. If you lose your life for my sake you will find it... what will it profit to gain the whole world, if in the process you lose your soul?"

It is a gross misuse of the words of Jesus to hear in them a diatribe against hard work or profit, for that matter. There is a sense in which taking up a cross, volunteering for unnecessary responsibility, is always hard work. Sometimes it is not even very visible or dramatic. Jesus was not recommending martyrdom. The dailiness of bearing a cross means a way of living, a basic orientation, a determination that the meaning of my life will be located somewhere outside myself. It will, in fact, mean working very hard.

James Autry, CEO of the Meredith Corporation, has written a remarkable little book of essays and poems on management under the title, Love and Profit. One of them is "The Meaning of Rich." Autry reflects that we used to think $64,000, or $50 a week for the rest of your life was rich. But...

> "Money comes and goes,
> and so does the meaning of rich,
> but most of us retired before we learned
> that nothing pays off
> like having work to do."
> [p. 48]

And profit? If we know anything about economic systems, it is that systems that do not generate profit and capital do not provide basic goods and services for very long, that whatever else an economic system does it must encourage people to work hard.

The incident between Jesus and his would-be disciples very simply defines the nature of that decision which, in one way or another, confronts every one of us.

Who will we be?

What True King will we serve?

The shape of that will differ for each of us.

For one it will be coming here weekly to tutor a youngster.

For another it will mean giving up a Saturday to work at Cabrini-Green.

For one it will mean attending yet another planning meeting when the TV beckons.

For another it will mean speaking a word of compassion and justice in an environment where that word will not win friends.

For one it will mean staying with a relationship and trying again and for another leaving a relationship and starting again.

For one it is returning to a task that needs doing and for another finding, perhaps for the first time, a cross to pick up and carry.

It means volunteering... It means doing what you don't have to do... It means giving more than you are required to give. It means investing your life fully.

If you are fortunate you already know that and are in some way doing it. If you are blessed you have work to do; something for which you live, something or someone so important to you that you forget yourself and die a little or a lot. If you are truly blessed and fully alive - you are giving yourself to a child, a parent, a friend, your students, your clients, your patients, a stranger, the helpless, the homeless, the sick, the prisoner. The very essence of Christianity - the essence of what he taught and lived and died expressing is just this: if you lose yourself for his sake, you will gain your life, your soul.

When you give your life to him, or when you give it to others, which is always very close to giving your life to him - something mysterious and incredible and very good happens to you. You get something back. It's called your soul, your self, your life.

Jesus - the Christ, promised that one day.

All praise to him.

Amen.